

May 30, 2014

To my Oakridge High School colleagues.

I will be sitting in the stands at graduation on Sunday. Since I started here in 1991, I have attended all but two of the Oakridge High School graduations. My feelings concerning this decision are mixed; I love taking part in commencement with you all and paying respect to the young people we have enjoyed, learned from, and inspired over the past four years. There are many in this senior class who I feel close to. I've labored on this decision for a while and feel compelled to explain my reasons. Please consider with an open mind.

The students of the Oakridge High School class of 2014 graduate into a complicated and challenging world. Public education and public school teachers in the state of Michigan since 2010 have been under assault from a political agenda that does not value equal access to education for all social classes of children. State college costs have risen dramatically in the past decade. Students who come from low and middle-income families face an unfair financial burden to reach their educational goals. A large percentage of our students in the OHS class of 2014 fall within these economic parameters. I have chosen not to participate in commencement to protest a state-wide system that refuses adequate financial support to middle class students at the collegiate and K-12 level, as well as public policy that has spawned state-wide advocacy of substandard computer courses including at OHS, the E-20-20 computer credit recovery program.

The state of Michigan is cultivating a society that is dividing access to educational opportunity based primarily on familial wealth. It is my belief that the state is in violation of the "Equal Protection clause" of the 14th amendment to the U.S. Constitution. By removing myself from graduation, I hope to bring awareness to this fact.

On Sunday Superintendent Livezey will most likely announce that Oakridge High School has for the fourth consecutive year graduated its highest percentage of students in school history. While numerically true, this is a claim I cannot support with my participation in commencement.

Graduation rates in this state no longer accurately coincide with actual achievement in the classroom. The state of Michigan has replaced the evaluative expertise of teachers with percentage targets tied directly into state funding and district certification. Unfounded graduation rate expectations have forced school districts, out of financial necessity, to lower standards at the expense of needs of individual students. Schools statewide have engaged academically inadequate E 20-20 computer credit recovery courses, and like programs, to achieve such goals. This practice undermines rigor in the classroom. It offers students, who most need our guidance and the accountability of consistent and suitable academic standards, an easy (and unhealthy) way out. It minimizes the value of a hard earned diploma for those students who have worked diligently in the classroom to achieve graduation requirements. Ultimately, it turns public schools into enabling mills. It also does great harm to the very students that it purports to help by conditioning them to believe that life provides chance after chance minus accountability.

I will note below two real examples (names have been changed) in which the E 20-20 credit recovery program has provided inadequate academic cause for graduation of individual OHS

students. I am absolutely sure that numerous similar situations currently exist at Oakridge High School and in school districts all over the state of Michigan.

Senior boy (John Doe) class of 2014.

John Doe is a nice kid. He was a senior this spring in my 2nd semester Government class. He did not pass the course. About a week ago when John realized he would not graduate, he enrolled at Orchard View Adult Education for \$150. In five days he completed the E 20-20 credit recovery class and earned credit for an 18 week High School Government course. I spoke with John Wednesday on his last day of school. I asked him about his e 20-20 experiences. He told me that since July he has taken nine E 20-20 classes earning four and 1/2 high school credits. (his permanent record states eight) I asked what he thought about the E 20-20 system. John stated, "It's not good. It's a scapegoat. It's not the real world... if you don't do the homework, if you don't do what you should there's still a way out. And that isn't true...there's nobody out there to fix it for you." - John Doe will walk at Oakridge graduation on Sunday June 1.

Senior girl (Jane Doe) class of 2013.

Jane Doe failed my Economics course last year. She earned credit through summer school. She failed other courses as well. As last year's graduation approached, Jane still needed a math credit. I was told by a third party how the situation played out. Jane had been procrastinating on completion of her E 20-20 recovery math course. On a Saturday morning prior to graduation Jane opened up the E 20-20 math recovery course for her friend, a student in the OHS class of 2013 "Top Ten." Her friend spent the entire weekend, finishing off Jane's math homework. Jane stopped in a couple of times not to help her, but to see how things were going. With homework complete, Jane took a test, gained credit, and qualified for graduation. E 20-20 provides no effective way to limit the farming out of assignments to friends or the buying of those services from a fellow student. I fear both are happening on a regular basis at OHS and around the state. This is one of many broken components of an inadequate recovery program. Jane Doe graduated from OHS last year with the class of 2013.

My non-participation in 2014 graduation should NOT to be seen as dissatisfaction with the current administration at Oakridge High School or with the Oakridge School District administration. In fact, Mr. McVoy has agreed that we need to take an in-depth look at this issue and has approved of a move to bring forth a committee next Fall to do so. He has also been consistent in closing the door to credit recovery prior to graduation in an effort to reduce scrambling at the end of the year. As for District Administration, I understand the pressures posed by the state in order to achieve full funding. I realize the dilemma caused by tying graduation rates directly to district certification. I know that school boards and superintendents want graduation numbers to keep going up for good reason; they need funding to run a school system. Alas this is the case for many districts. Similar claims of historically high graduation rates (many inflated by weak credit recovery programs) made this weekend across the state, to thousands of graduating seniors and their families, and scores of high school faculty, will echo those at Oakridge. This is what ill thought out public policy in Lansing has fostered in our schools. The results unfortunately will be lasting.

My nonparticipation should NOT be seen as a statement of dissatisfaction with current staff at Oakridge High School. To the contrary I respect you immensely. Your efforts in the classroom, on the ball field, at the dances, and the trips, and in the administrative and copying offices is the fabric that has held our Oakridge Community School system together in the face of such odds. For a long time this high school has served as a lighthouse for the community. It has helped teach young

people the value of accountability. In addition the individual support provided me this year by many of you, was wholly appreciated.

The problem at bay goes far beyond our little school. We stand at a crossroads in public education in this state, in this nation. We all individually chose to dedicate ourselves to a career in K-12 education for unique and personal reasons; however for each of us, one of those reasons was to best serve students in our charge. Well, those students (and their posterity) need for us to challenge this system for them. The alternative will be a slide to towards the institutionalization of substandard public education and a permanent increase in poverty across this state. Soon, if trends continue, college will be affordable only for those of means. As alternate and easier credit recovery programs make themselves more accessible without adequate state regulation, impoverished K-12 districts will see more of their students choosing this *easy* route to graduation. The wealthy will continue to access higher education and the high salary employment that comes with it, while a service sector economy that provides inadequate wages, lousy health care, and no retirement plan will open itself up fully to those students relying on E 20-20 like ways to manufacture a high school diploma.

What can be done? First of all we actively confront public policy that certifies substandard computer program recovery courses statewide. Secondly, we individually strengthen the accountability aspect of our own credit recovery system. Five days for high school credit and massive cheating is not adequate for Oakridge standards, even if the state deems it so. Third, for the long-term health of our students we must challenge the skyrocketing cost of college tuition. What good does it do for us to adequately prepare our students for university, if the degree, which comes from higher education, leaves the student with insurmountable and life-long debt?

The very fabric of our nation was built on the back of equal and affordable access to public education, accountability in the classroom, and hard work. None of that is present in the current credit recovery system; and new laws coming down from the state will widen this access. So, together for the sake of our students, our profession, and the long-term health of this nation, we must find a way to fight back. All of us - teachers, principals, superintendents, staff, school board members, and parents; this challenge is on us.

That confrontation must begin somewhere.

Why not at Oakridge? Why not now? Why not me? Why not you? Please join me Sunday in the stands if you feel so inspired.

Thank you for your patience in considering this dilemma.

Respectfully,

Bob Wood